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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [HR](#)

SUBJECT: LOCAL ELECTIONS: HDZ FALTERS, OPPOSITION GAINS

REF: A. ZAGREB 792

[1](#)B. ZAGREB 625

[1](#)1. (SBU) SUMMARY AND COMMENT: Strong personalities, unpredictable coalitions, and a continued drop in popularity of the ruling Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) marked Croatia's May 15 local elections. Coalitions among multiple parties will be necessary to form governments in the vast majority of cities and counties, and some may take weeks to negotiate. Voter turnout was a historically low 40 percent, perhaps indicating the Croatian public's political exhaustion after two rounds of presidential elections in January and a long build-up to these local polls. No electoral irregularities were reported.

[1](#)2. (SBU) Small parties posted the largest gains in Sunday's contest, led by the Croatian Pensioners Party (HSU), which climbed from about one percent to four percent of seats in county assemblies, and the Croatian Party of Rights (HSP), which rose from four to eight percent. The opposition Social Democratic Party (SDP) and its partners made significant gains in traditional HDZ strongholds and solidified their rule in major cities such as Zagreb, Rijeka, and potentially Split. Several independent lists were unexpectedly successful and will play decisive roles in such places as Split on the coast, Osijek in eastern Slavonia, and Karlovac in central Croatia.

[1](#)3. (SBU) The HDZ, Croatia's largest party, lost votes both to apathy and anger, as a portion of its traditional voters either stayed home or shifted to the HSP and other right wing lists to protest HDZ reforms, such as cooperation with the Hague Tribunal. Despite defections, the HDZ will actually lose power in only a handful of places. It will, however, grow much more dependent on coalitions - particularly with the HSP - to stay in power. While talk of early parliamentary elections continues, a vote of no-confidence remains very unlikely before 2006. END SUMMARY AND COMMENT.

ZAGREB: PERSONALITY POWER OF THE ONCE AND FUTURE MAYOR

[1](#)3. (SBU) In Zagreb, SDP Deputy Mayor Milan Bandic's populist approach to city government won him stronger than expected results. The local press portrayed Bandic's victory with 41 percent of the vote as the defining event of these elections. Falling just one seat short of an absolute majority in his bid to take back the mayor's chair after being forced out in 2002 by a drunk-driving incident, Bandic needs only one coalition partner to form his government. His near-majority allows him to accomplish this without resorting to his estranged former coalition partner, the Croatian People's Party (HNS), whose tough talk against the former mayor (ref A) backfired, costing them more than half of their seats on the city council. He will likely find his partner among the two independent lists that passed the five percent threshold, that of businesswoman Tatjana Holjevac and Croatian-American millionaire and former presidential candidate Boris Miskic.

[1](#)4. (SBU) The lists of other popular mayors won reelection by large margins, including Ivan Cehok (Croatian Social Liberal Party - HSLP) in the northern city of Varazdin with 73 percent of the vote, Zvonimir Mrcic (SDP) in nearby Koprivnica with 72 percent, and Vojko Obersnel (SDP) in the port city of Rijeka with 49 percent. These strong performances may fuel those who support the direct election of mayors over the current party-list system.

OSIJEK: HDZ HUMILIATION

[1](#)5. (SBU) Osijek strongman and recent HDZ outcast Branimir Glavas was the most dramatic example of personality over party in these elections. Expelled from the HDZ just days before the candidacy deadline due to his support of a plan to regionalize Croatian local government, Glavas rallied his supporters and drew 25 percent of the city vote and 27 percent of the county vote -- three times as many votes as the HDZ in the city and two times more in the county. Glavas will need coalition partners to rule Osijek, but is likely to

find cooperation in the HSP, which also significantly outpolled the HDZ.

16. (SBU) COMMENT: PM Ivo Sanader had been looking for an opportunity to rid the party of Glavas and his extremist views, but he may have instead created a stronger enemy to his reforms. Glavas's victory also represents a loss for liberal parties, which have used broad coalitions to keep the mayor's seat from the HDZ for 15 years. END COMMENT.

17. (SBU) The HDZ's other major losses came from leftist

coalitions in cities the party has ruled since Croatian independence -- Sisak, 40 km southeast of Zagreb, and Sinj, a Dalmatian icon of Croatian nationalism. The HDZ will hang on to power in the symbolically significant cities of Vukovar and Dubrovnik.

#### SPLIT: THE STRENGTH OF THE INDEPENDENTS

18. (SBU) While Glavas convinced his former-party faithful to follow him, other independent list leaders built success from scratch. In Split, a city famous for surprising politics, the independent business-focused list of former basketball star Zeljko Jerkov took nearly 15 percent of the vote. With ten of 25 city council seats taken by the SDP coalition, six by the HDZ, and the remainder scattered across the spectrum, Jerkov's four seats will likely be decisive.

19. (SBU) A similar situation exists in Karlovac, where the SDP and HDZ are in a dead heat. Both sides are scrambling for coalition partners, and the two seats won by independent politician Dubravko Delic, along with two seats held by the Pensioners Party, will tip the balance.

#### KNIN: THE ETHNIC FACTOR

10. (SBU) The Independent Democratic Serbian Party (SDSS) won a plurality in the south-central city of Knin, in part thanks to the party's efforts to bus in Serb refugee voters who have not yet returned to the area. The SDSS fell short of an outright majority, but may give up claims to the mayor's office in exchange for a coalition with the HDZ in line with their national coalition. There has also been press speculation that the HDZ will form a coalition with the HSP and the extreme-right Croatian Block in order to shut the SDSS out of the city government, but Zagreb party leaders may discourage this. In either case, the mayor is likely to be the HDZ's 24-year-old Josipa Rimac, locally popular for her work as director of the Knin chapter of the Croatian Red Cross and potentially one of the youngest mayors in Europe.

11. (SBU) An additional factor that may affect the power balance in some areas is the constitutional requirement that minorities be represented in proportion with their presence in the population. The State Electoral Commission will assess whether the number of winning candidates of each ethnicity from all parties match this proportion. If not, additional seats will be added to the city or county assembly and special elections will be held to fill those seats, potentially adding to a party's strength.

#### HSP: THE BUBBLING RIGHT WING

12. (SBU) The gains the HSP made were expected, but not as large as they predicted for themselves. This far-right party struggling to remake itself (ref B) will be a key HDZ partner in several counties, which may well result in a few chief executive jobs being filled by HSP members. COMMENT: This will represent some of the first opportunities for this party to actually govern, a dramatic change from its vociferous opposition tradition. After disappointingly nationalist rhetoric during the campaign, it is unlikely the international community will accept the party as reformed in the near term. END COMMENT.

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